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Women's Concerns

Report



Counseling in cross-cultural situations

A decade ago I attended a week-long workshop on living and working overseas. It was designed for those who were consulting and counseling families of business executives posted abroad. I found the material engaging and helpful, even though I was not then living or working overseas. I wondered why. At the end of the week, the presenter gave me the answer in his closing remarks. He suggested that if we remembered one thing of all we had covered, let it be this: Every social transaction is cross-cultural. Each encounter is a cross-cultural experience.

All I had absorbed that week and the closing reminder of the differences that set us apart and the similarities that draw us together were useful as I worked as a therapist at Family Services in Elkhart, Ind., and in the past eight and a half years as my husband and I lived in Kathmandu, Nepal, where I practiced as a psychotherapist.

In the year and a half since our return from Nepal, my husband and I have been guests in many Mennonite homes from Florida to Texas to Vancouver to Los Angeles as we did deputation for Mennonite Board of Missions and Mennonite Central Committee. I have again experienced many aspects of the cross-cultural experience in these wonderful interchanges.

As you read this issue, I hope you will see through the words to the feelings of the authors. You will see that they were living the experiences they describe. Many of them were enjoying the encounters, the learning and the

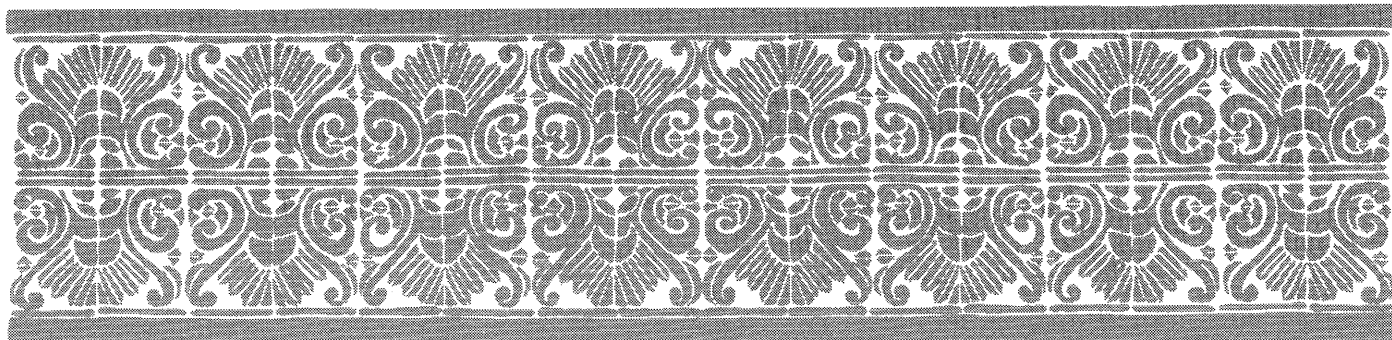
knowledge that perhaps in some small way their presence had a positive impact in a cross-cultural encounter.

A veteran of overseas service, Margaret Metzler recalls pastoral counseling experiences in China. An anonymous volunteer church worker challenges readers with a cross-cultural dilemma she faced while in service. Joan L. Hockman reflects on her encounter as a non-ethnic Mennonite spiritual counselor with "ethnic" Mennonites. Myrta Rivera and Jeanette M. Gascho tell of assisting immigrants as they move through the maze of adaptation to the culture of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. Colleen Kliever describes her work with women and domestic violence in Nicaragua. Michael Krajniak, a friend from Kathmandu, reflects on his experience of informal counseling with men and women of Bangladesh and Nepal. Delores Friesen has compiled an annotated bibliography, and I add a piece about working with Nepali men.

As Max Warren, an Anglican missiologist reminds us, "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on someone's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival." I remember these words and I benefit from them now at home as I remind myself that *all* our social encounters are cross-cultural.

—Ethel Yake Metzler, compiler

Ethel Yake Metzler has recently returned from eight and a half years in Nepal where she worked as a therapist with persons of 15 nationalities, as well as Nepalis from seven different cultural groupings. She and her husband, Edgar, who was executive director of the United Mission to Nepal, were co-sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Board of Missions. Her residence is in Akron, Pa., where she is writing and beginning a private practice.



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By Jeanette M. Gascho and Myrta Rivera

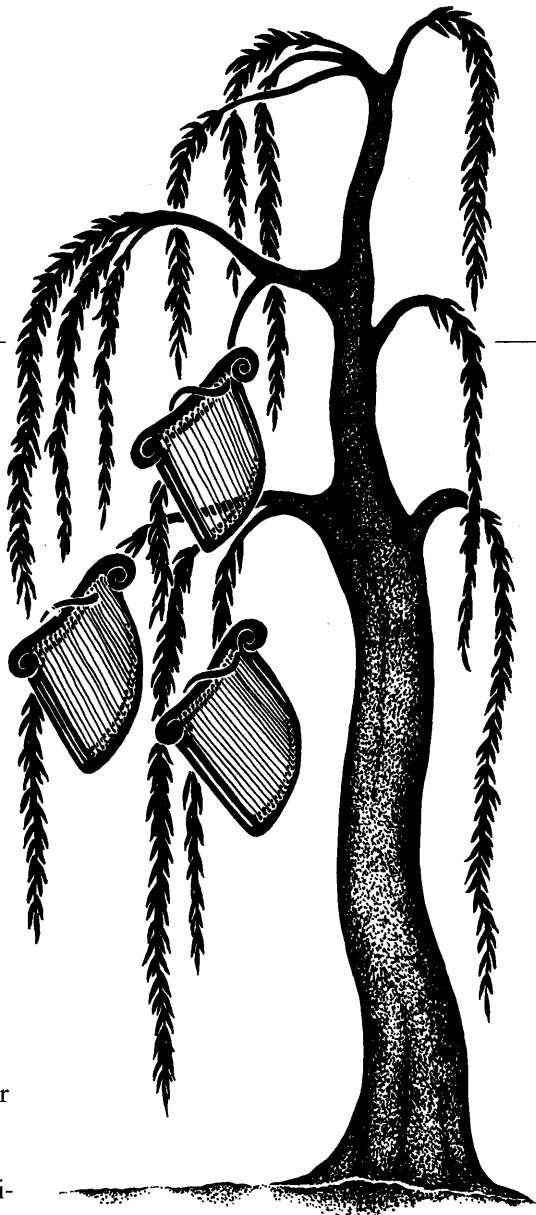
Taking down our harps and singing again

The writer of Psalm 137 describes a vivid scene: The exiled Jews are sitting on the river bank. They are weeping. They have hung their harps on the willow trees, and they can't imagine they will ever be able to sing in a foreign land. Myrta Rivera repaints this image to describe the experience of immigration and settlement in a new country. Over the last couple of decades, she has helped in various ways to welcome and settle thousands of people. She now serves as Executive Director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre in Ontario. This geographic area is ranked the fourth destination for immigrants in all of Canada.

Most immigrants who come to Canada "hang up their harps." They find places to live, unpack the treasures they brought with them, find the food they like and learn to cope with the weather. They may even become citizens, learn English and buy their own homes. Externally, they appear to be "settled." Some even begin to play their harps again.

However, most are not "singing." Their internal experience is of being a sojourner in a foreign land. Energy level is low; social networks are limited; they take few risks and rarely access institutions. They seldom feel comfortable outside their home areas or communities. They remain at the side of the river, having hung up their harps, unable to sing, sometimes for years, sometimes for the rest of their lives.

The Jews learned an important lesson during the Babylonian exile: God is wherever they are. Up to that point, they believed God stayed put, in Israel. When they



began to understand that God was with them wherever they were, they began rearranging and expanding their idea of God in their lives. They started singing again. Perhaps a goal of settlement work is to help families who have hung up their harps to take them down again and to remind them that they have not left God behind, so that they will sing again.

What does it feel like to immigrate to a new place? What occupies the minds of women and men who have left their homes to start again?

For many of us, it is difficult to imagine the journey and the distance traveled. Yet we who are "ethnic Mennonites" catch a glimpse when we consider the distance our own people have come just in the last couple of generations. Jeanette

has a clear childhood picture in her mind of her aunt's house in summer, children running barefoot on the grass, a group of women in the shade of a maple tree, a semi-circle of coverings and solid-colored cape dresses, silver bowls held between knees, small mounds of bright green peas growing as the women chat and shell peas. She contrasts her own food preparation in a kitchen with just enough work space for two, often alone, standing, perhaps listening to the radio for company, children out of sight in other rooms. Preparing food in a group is historical and traditional, and is not part of her everyday life. She is aware of the differences between the two settings, differences in feel, community spirit, privacy, connection and independence.

Myrta recalls a family from Sudan who came to Canada via a refugee camp where they lived in a shack with a dirt floor. A worker came upon a scene that surprised her.

"If I move to a place where the people only have one eye, I am expected to pluck out one of my own eyes in order to fit in."

The girls in the family were squatting on the floor, peeling potatoes with a large knife, letting the peels fall directly onto the floor. After helping them find something in which to put the peels, she suggested they clean the floor. The notion of cleaning a floor is very odd when your concept of a floor is that it's made of dirt. Sweep it to smooth it out, maybe, but clean it? In this particular instance, we don't know if the worker's interventions were comforting or confusing.

The Canadian Council for Refugees asked 13 Somali women to describe their processes of integration into Canada. One woman said, "If I move to a place where the people only have one eye, I am expected to pluck out one of my own eyes in order to fit in." Another said, "People look at us with our black skin and our veils and they think they know what we're like. They have no idea." Another woman who was fleeing slayings in her country of origin said she feels as if she is "climbing a ladder to peace" and is now faced with hidden slayings, against which she feels powerless to fight or protect herself. An older woman commented on how important time is in Canada. For her whole life, it wasn't important to know what time it was; she got her first watch since she's come here.

A woman who was a well-known activist in Somalia remembers how powerful and beautiful she once felt in contrast to how she feels she is seen here. One woman, desperately lonely, said, "I pray to the ground, that it's not so slippery; I pray to the wind, that it's not so strong; I pray to the snow that it stays away. Sometimes it works and God listens. God is my only friend."

A woman from former Yugoslavia talks about her balcony in her home city of Sarajevo. It is filled with geraniums, and the view beyond is of mountains. Her home, the building, indeed Sarajevo, no longer exist as they do in her memory. She feels it is her job to keep the memory of her Sarajevo balcony alive. If she lets go, stops remembering, it all ceases to exist. In the midst of devoting her life to people of her community, teaching the children, filling out forms, helping people settle here and find what they need, this woman is not "settled." Her chosen burden of remembering orders her priorities and demands the majority of space in her mind.

Many others also feel priorities that seem much more important than remembering how to put a card in a machine to get money. Those take up the energy needed for learning English.

Our challenge and great joy is to learn to be with an immigrant woman in ways that honor her priorities, recognizing that our priorities are different and perhaps irrelevant to her. Helping her find her peace here will not happen if we don't respect and work within her goals as she perceives them. Needs being met must be placed in the context of her priorities. One of the ways we understand how she perceives the world is to be willing to go literally and figuratively to her home and listen, and to invite her into our homes and listen.

Myrta notices that over the years, churches who sponsor refugees sometimes misunderstand the kind of help that is needed. Churches initially hold families in a "wonderful cocoon." Refugees are given tremendous practical support to provide a "leg up" to get new lives started. Then, in many cases, the church lets families go sooner than the families are ready. Newcomers are heard to say, "I've been here only six months and they're pushing me to get a job. I'm not ready for that, I don't know how. I am beginning to resent the same people I am grateful to." Perhaps sponsoring churches need to learn to honor newcomers' internal priorities in deciding how to provide and sustain assistance.

Sometimes our attempts at being helpful create expectations that are confusing. In one situation, generous women in the church were taking turns doing the laundry for a woman with seven children because she didn't yet have a washer and dryer. In the beginning they were glad to do this, knowing what a tremendous gift it was. Over time, however, the woman began to expect that these women would continue to do her laundry, and the women began to resent her expectation. The woman was trying to figure out the "system" here, and the messages she understood included: In this culture we do each other's wash.

In six months, when the church felt she should be on her own, the "gift" was withdrawn. The woman was understandably confused and wondered what she had done to make them angry. Why would they stop doing what was culturally acceptable? What a difference it would have made if someone had gone with her to the laundromat—

where other people in our culture who don't have washers and dryers do their wash—or invited her into their homes to learn how to operate their machines.

Perhaps learning to do her own laundry was not what was important to her at all. Listening with our hearts helps us see that for some “getting over it and getting on with life” is not the priority. These immigrant women may not feel it's an option to reorder their priorities. In fact, what feels most important may be to hold on to their own private “balconies in Sarajevo,” to stay aware of the losses. When we truly listen, we guard against our temptation to say a woman has “trouble” learning English or she doesn't seem to want to remember what we tell her, or she isn't grateful for our help. If we listen with our hearts we will not push her to find a job before she's ready or suggest that she should be “settled” by now.

What is involved in helping a family feel settled? In this geographical area, almost two-thirds of the immigrants are classified as refugees who have fled war and political persecution in their homeland. At the K-W Multicultural Centre, 9,000 of these people were “served” in the last year. “Serving” these people may include supportive listening; filling out tax forms; finding housing; connecting with cultural interpreter services to assist with interpreting legal, counseling, school or medical situations; coordinating a volunteer English tutor; teaching job search skills; or making referrals to a myriad of community supports. The Centre serves people from more than 50 countries. Recently most are from former Yugoslavia.

The Centre's front desk answered 18,000 phone calls in the last year, not including calls picked up on other phones in the office, outgoing calls, calls diverted to the temporary holding pen of the answering machine while all the lines were busy, and return calls made to follow up on messages. All these calls to respond to requests and needs.

However some needs go unaddressed because they are unspoken. Myrta is interested in tracking calls in which the caller hangs up. We can guess that someone was not comfortable leaving a message in English, perhaps not understanding what was required to do so.

The hang-ups that linger in Myrta's mind, though, are those where a child hangs up midway through the call. These children are probably younger than 10 years old, judging from their childlike voices, breathing and phrasing. The child is on the phone speaking in English, Mom is in the background speaking another language, trying to get a request or question through. “Mommy says that . . .,” “She wants to know if . . .” and other fragmented attempts to convey something. Perhaps the message is too complicated, or the child's English inadequate, or the pressure too great, and so the overwhelmed child hangs up. Myrta wonders what happens in that home after the aborted phone call.

It is difficult to be helpful when we do not know what help is needed. However, when we have listened from our hearts, any help we offer is in the context of the other's priorities. It is important when helping immigrant women make peace with their lives not only to help them “hang up their harps” but also to find ways of supporting them in taking down their harps and singing from their hearts. Practical, logistical support is critical as we pray for the day when they begin to sing a new song in their new land.



Myrta Rivera lives in Waterloo with her cat. She has worked for the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre since 1987, and has served as its executive director since 1990. Jeanette M. Gascho lives in Waterloo with her family. She works as a sexual assault and family counselor, and serves on the board of directors of the Centre. You can visit the Centre's website at www.kwmc.on.ca.

by Michael Krajniak

A foreign male counseling Asians

I joined the Peace Corps to see the world. Right after that Uncle Sam wanted to show me more as an infantry soldier in Vietnam. That four-year period changed my life forever. At the time I was not a trained psychotherapist. But in Asia, among the poorest classes in remote areas and stressful conditions, opportunities to get involved with other people's lives emerged. I had a choice: to help or not to help. I found myself helping as I never had before.

After the Peace Corps and Vietnam I took a job with CARE and spent ten years working in Bangladesh (including some consultation on design for MCC Self-Help Crafts (now called Ten Thousand Villages). It was a formative time, filled with adventure, intrigue, drama and tragedy. The East/West Pakistan War was raging throughout the country. Life was raw, often merciless. I wondered about the reason for all the carnage and unhappiness. I questioned my purpose on the planet and what I had to do to fulfill it.

On Bhola Island I lived above a makeshift clinic run by Save the Children. There I watched women in dire need of help come to the nurses. Slowly I learned about the life of Bengali women and male/female relationships. I saw how they lived as second-class citizens, overworked, underpaid (or unpaid) and often unloved.

I learned how offering even a minor insight to a troubled couple could improve their understanding of each other's condition. During field trips with my staff, all young men, they questioned me about life and relationships in the United States. I sensed a deep desire to know more about how men live with women and how they come to love each other. These male-oriented makeshift group therapy sessions confirmed my belief that many Asian men in marital relationships were questioning their attitudes that put women into intolerable situations.



Subtle changes also were happening in the Bangladeshi culture that was influenced by modernization and the invasion of Western communications. Some men didn't detect the changes until they had the opportunity to discuss their feelings with others. I began to sense how a foreigner might act as a catalyst. My listening, answering questions and making gentle inquiry of these men, could help them envision better ways of being husbands and fathers than they had seen modeled by their fathers and observed in their communities.

Robi, my Bengali cook of five years, came to my house one day after a visit to his village. I knew he was disturbed about something and eventually he told me his story. That changed a lot of my naive notions about life in Asia. Robi's marriage had been arranged by his parents. Only after the wedding did he realize that his wife was mentally retarded. They had no children. In the village he saw how his wife was deteriorating, partly because she was poorly treated in his parents' home during his long absence from the village and partly because she was being sexually molested and was too afraid to report it.

I encouraged Robi to bring his wife with him to my house. He soon got her involved with gardening and light housework. He helped her settle into a daily routine that gave her physical activity and affirmed her sense of worth. I seldom spoke to her or saw her in the house. According

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to her previous habit in the village, she tried to avoid men. She did her work when I was away and retreated to her room when I came home.

A friend suggested that we send her to a gynecologist who relieved minor obstructions. This resulted in pregnancy and a successful birth. As my contract in Bangladesh came to an end, Robi's wife and child found work in another household where the people had a little girl who had always wanted a little sister to play with. Months later I visited Robi and was amazed to see the progress of his wife and child. Effects of years of abuse and neglect in the village had been peeled away. Far beyond my expectations his wife was responding to simple acts of human kindness.

Not all cases end up so well, but I was surprised how little effort had brought about such encouraging results. I realized how much a person from another culture, with sensitivity, concern and respect for the other person, could contribute to better human relationships. In a culture where a strong sense of fatalism and caste-determined roles inhibit change, a new awareness may give hope that attitudes and cultural habits can change, particularly as they pertain to relationships between men and women.

Both women and men looked to me for advice even though I didn't have a wife. The women shared in-depth information about their lives and culture and showed me that the human psyche everywhere yearns for understanding and happiness. The men helped me understand how much power cultural practices exert in their lives and subsequently in the lives of the women in their families and communities. I also learned there is a limit to how much common sense from a foreigner is useful to the Asian experience.

Michael Krajniak worked with the Association for Craft Producers from which MCC Ten Thousand Villages buys crafts. He has had 30 years of cross-cultural work and is currently in a masters program in psychotherapy.


by Ethel Yake Metzler

The questions of Nepali men

When we began living in Nepal in 1990, I expected to meet persons from many different countries and cultures. We lived in Kathmandu, the capital, which was small. Yet, embassies and the offices of numerous international agencies are located there, as are the offices of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN), the largest development organization in the country. My husband directed this international, interdenominational organization with its more than 200 Christian professional/technical personnel and their families and its 2000 Nepali staff. UMN had a team of pastoral counselors who would call on me when someone needed more intense or extended therapy than they could provide, or a second opinion regarding assessment or diagnosis, or assistance with training and workshops.

I imagined that, given the stress of living overseas, people from the international community would use my services as a psychotherapist and family counselor. But, given the fact that I was Christian and my husband worked for a Christian organization and most Nepalis are Hindu and/or Buddhist, I did not know whether Nepalis would come to me for help and, if they sought my services, whether I could be of any use. My language proficiency lay solely in English.

But Nepalis who were referred by mutual friends began to seek my services and refer their Nepali friends. My work with Nepalis, both male and female, took shape. I did not anticipate that Nepali men would be inclined to ask help from a white American woman. Yet they called to talk about what therapy was and subsequently made appointments.

As I became acquainted with my Nepali male clients, I asked why they thought I might be a suitable person with whom to talk. In summary, these eight reasons emerged:

- You cannot know very much about my ethnic group and its culture, so it is reasonable to believe that you will not have pat answers to my problems.



- You are bound by confidentiality. Should a Nepali expose a problem to another Nepali, that person will invariably begin the gossip cycle.
- You are ignorant about the differences within and between Nepali groups. You will need to ask a lot of questions whose answers may be helpful to me.
- As a woman, you will know about women—what they want in a partner, how their bodies work, how women feel, and what sort of characteristics a man should look for in a young woman.
- You may also be able to tell me important information about my personality and how a woman would relate to me.
- As a Christian associated with UMN you will respect the religious beliefs, customs and regulations of other religions and you will not thrust your beliefs on anyone. It is known that people from UMN live their faith as well as speak about it.
- As an older woman who has had children, you have information about sexuality which we have not been taught, and you have no reason to withhold information that might be useful.
- You helped my friend with a serious problem and I think you might be able to help me deal with my problem.

Nepali response

The responses to my questioning usually brought the cross-cultural nature of the therapeutic relationship to the foreground and led to further disclosure of the client's expectations of himself and of me. Whether the interaction is within a family, across genders, across ethnic

groups, or across national and/or religious groupings, each person holds basic assumptions about life which differ drastically from another person's. This obligates them to pay attention to what they consider important as well as to discover those beliefs, attitudes and patterns of behavior which are precious to the other.

We then could explore parallels between how we were relating in therapy and how my client might be relating in his problem situation with his relationships. This could challenge him to imagine how a change of approach on his part might impact the problem. He could decide how our way of relating might be a model for him.

Problems Nepali men brought to therapy

I noticed some similarities between dilemmas Nepali men presented in therapy and those of men with whom I had worked in America. In Nepal:

- Men faced conflicts in relationships within families, particularly with individual parents, siblings, spouses, and sisters-in-laws.
- Mothers wanted compliance to religious rituals and expected the wages that their sons earned.
- Fathers, along with mothers, wanted to arrange the marriage of their unmarried sons, determining the person, the timing and the other particulars.
- Sisters wanted to learn from their brothers, to be introduced to their friends and to be included in the social activities of the males of the family, thus limiting the social experimentation the brothers wanted to do.
- Wives often seemed to their husbands to be strange people, not at all similar to sisters. A married man was often shocked at the demands of his wife which differed from the family's expectations of what she should want. He was often puzzled at his wife's anger and displeasure with his family and distrustful of her ambitions for herself and for him.
- From watching TV and videos, Nepali men felt confused about their own sexual practices, values and desires. They wanted a safe place to talk, disclose their ignorance, find clear information and discover the values they wanted to espouse.

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"You cannot know very much about my ethnic group and its culture, so it is reasonable to believe that you will not have pat answers to my problems."

- Men had troubles around employment, lack of opportunities for jobs their parents expected them to obtain, and differences between themselves and their parents about choice of vocation.
- Men worried about dishonesty when they withheld information from their families about their change of religious beliefs, vocational plans, relationships or lifestyle. They wondered how to inform their families when they had made a decision that went against their culture.
- Men felt confusion about being a son of a mixed racial marriage, where one of the parents was Nepali but the family's language was English and their lifestyle was a mixture of both.
- Men worried over the use and effects of alcohol.

Origins of problems

Nepali women and men were facing the impact of Western modernization on practically every facet of their lives. Their values, the ones they had personally chosen, the ones they inherited from their families and those imbedded in their ethnic group, contrasted starkly with the glossy images and alluring promises of advertising. Caught in a transitional age, they felt trapped by forces outside their control. To define themselves they needed to remember who they represented as members of their cultural group, and how this translated into obligations, choices and consequences for them and their families. Technology, mass communications and commercialism had begun to encroach on the boundaries which had protected individuals from the difficulties of making choices.

Solutions to problems

The intellectual and emotional resources men brought with them to therapy sometimes resulted in unexpected solutions. A man, distressed by having fathered a child with a married woman, decided to put back money for the child's education. Because both the mother's parents and her husband were wealthy, the child's mother believed that neither would know the source of the school fees as each

would think that the other had paid them. This decision seemed to satisfy both parents in their decision not to disclose the child's father's identity and to allow the husband to believe the child was his and the father to know he was taking responsibility in some way for his son. For the moment at least, this felt satisfactory—if token.

One young man resolved a problem of conflict with his mother who wanted him to do extensive shopping for items for her daily and festival *pujas*, the worship rituals performed according to rules prescribed by caste and family. As a child he had been raised by Christian missionaries in a country outside the Indian subcontinent. His Nepali parents wanted him to have the best education and, when missionaries volunteered to raise and educate their son, they accepted the invitation. They did not expect that he would be raised Christian and come to accept the Christian faith. Now for him to shop for his mother felt repugnant, as though he were participating in the rituals in which he did not believe. He struggled with this dilemma over a long period, debating the pros and cons. One day I asked him to consider what Jesus would have him do. After a long pause he answered, "Obey her."

Clients referred to the comfort they felt coming to my office in my home. Here they found acceptance and assistance without annoyance often associated with intergenerational struggles. My office and home represented the ideal setting where respect and understanding allowed all persons to breathe in peace and tranquility. They found a deeply desired parent who would express appreciation and approval without demanding compliance.

As a cross-cultural therapist in Nepal I was like a person traveling in a foreign land who had to trust those she met along the way to give honest and true answers to the questions she asked about the journey. Although trained as a guide, she needed expert guidance to proceed with her occupation in new territory.

by Colleen Kliever

More than a transplant of skills

Because I was single and living alone in a small village during my time in Brazil, I was able to become deeply engaged with the local culture. I learned that women who were virgins were chosen as brides. They were the property of their husbands and subject to their husbands' rules. Men viewed young women who were not virgins as "common property." This meant that girls who had been sexually abused started the dating process as "common property." Gang rapes were explained and excused in that way: She wasn't a virgin so no one wanted to get stuck having to marry her. The town prostitute lived in destitute poverty in a hut that men in town built for her.

My neighbors were wonderful, kind people who had taken me under their wings. Their daughter stayed with me and we became good friends. Twice her mother fled to my house because her husband was drunk and chasing her with a knife. I learned more and more about men's violence against women as other women shared their stories.

I also learned about the power of the Bible when read by the poor. Women who could barely read were reading Bible stories from the background of their own experiences. I saw the Jesus stories having wonderful meaning for them, and the Word came alive in a whole new way for me as well.

I returned to the United States eager to deepen my understanding of the Bible. I went to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1985. There I witnessed the struggle of women on the cutting edge of ministry trying to break in. I witnessed their tears, their hurts and their triumphs.

I also witnessed two incidents of women being brutally beaten just outside my house. I felt led to do something about the problem of domestic violence. I joined Assist and Support (now called Steps Towards Safety) and began transporting women to the shelter and leading a support group for battered women. I completed my master's in social work and set out to work with MCC again in Nicaragua. My goal was to work with women.



Finding my niche in Nicaragua was not easy. I arrived in 1990 shortly after the change of government from socialism to capitalism. Tires were burning in the streets, and the country was on the verge of civil war. I didn't know Spanish so I couldn't communicate. Besides language study I went to every meeting about women that I was aware of. I went to church groups, NGOs and national feminist organizations. I even attended a seminary counseling class offered at the Baptist seminary.

These meetings gave me an overview of the existing groups working with women and served to further my language skills. I became known as I networked. Because of these contacts I received invitations to work in several different settings. I worked in two women's centers as a counselor. I also worked with the women's pastoral section of a church-based development agency. We were a team of Nicaraguan and expatriate women with different skills. We organized workshops and helped to promote women's interests in development projects. I was also invited to participate in drafting new legislation dealing with rape and incest. I had the opportunity to work at a prison for women, facilitating contact with their families and conducting workshops with the prisoners.

I believe that cross-cultural counseling is more than a transplant of our skills. I had to be aware of "where I was coming from" in more ways than one. I was a citizen of the country that had supported the war against them. I was the "*gringa*" who didn't have to worry about having food, transportation, medical care or a roof over my head. I will never forget stopping to pick up my colleague who taught at the seminary. Her home was made of plywood and a tin roof in a squatter barrio. I learned that social workers at the hospitals earned \$150 per month. I visited a family that gave me a quarter glass of coke they borrowed from a neighbor. Then I learned that they

"Women who could barely read were reading Bible stories from the background of their own experiences. I saw the Jesus stories having wonderful meaning for them, and the Word came alive in a whole new way for me as well."

had not eaten a solid meal in days. I was constantly humbled by the economic disparity.

I had to be sensitive and learn where the women I worked with were coming from. I listened to their stories and was inspired by their strength and their struggle. Many of these women had never been invited to tell their stories, and they received my gift of a listening ear while talking about their lives. They were so caught up with survival that they rarely had the chance to reflect on their lives. Many women suffered so much abuse in their relationships that they almost took it for granted.



As I lived and worked among these women, I was privileged to see them blossom as they began to reclaim themselves and appreciate who they were. Conservative church women from the countryside were energized by the chance to learn and share among themselves. I found that identifying the wheel of power and control and the cycle of abuse helped women see abuse as a systemic problem and not as something they caused or were responsible for.

In the end my own learnings were more than I contributed to those I worked with. I was able to use the tools of my trade, but was often challenged by my colleagues and clients to recognize my limitations. This experience with helping women transformed my thinking and my way of looking at life, for which I am grateful.

Colleen Kliwer is a licensed clinical social worker. She lives with her husband, Ron Flickinger, and their two children, Teresa and Marty, in Indianapolis. She is currently working at Family Service Association. She served in Brazil from 1980–1982 and in Nicaragua with MCC from 1990 until 1994.

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by Delores Friesen

Resources for intercultural interaction

Each January, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, offers an intensive training event in cross-cultural counseling. It includes a 10-day immersion in communities in Mexico, Fresno, and Los Angeles. Participants are exposed to many cultures, agencies, ministries, languages and faiths as they learn together to appreciate the challenges of a pluralistic society. Following the immersion, students meet in Fresno for further studies and counseling applications in cross-cultural interactions. Students learn the importance of developing skills of acceptance, understanding and communication across cultures as they practice them.

The following questions help to shape students' intercultural interactions:

1. What ethnic values does your family hold dear?
2. How does your family talk about being part of your ethnic group?
3. How does your family talk about other ethnic groups?
4. What are the consequences of belonging to your ethnic group?
5. What does it mean to be a member of your ethnic group?
6. How is your group stereotyped?
7. How is your family similar to and different from other families in your ethnic group?
8. What unique rituals did your family have in the past? How are these different now?
9. What ethnic rituals did your family celebrate? What do they celebrate now?
10. Who has the authority in your family?
11. If there are problems in your family, where do you get help? What is the nature of the help?

12. Would you ever get help from a counselor? Do you know of others in your ethnic group who would?
13. What does your family know about counseling?
14. How has the history of your ethnic group influenced you?
15. What are the most important symbols in your tradition?
16. What stories did you hear as you grew up?
17. What illnesses show up most frequently in your ethnic group?
18. When people are emotionally or physically ill, how are they healed and how does your group deal with this?
19. How have mobility and economic change affected your family?
20. Which religious customs, rituals and beliefs are most important to your family?

Delores Friesen lives in Fresno, Calif. She teaches in the pastoral counseling program at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

Letters

Thanks for the issue on "Kaleidoscopes: Women Juggling the Fragments" (Sept/Oct 1999). Kaleidoscope is a very effective image for this important topic. However, I was disappointed by the disproportionate emphasis on the experiences of women who are or have been child-rearers. (The only exception was the small article by Louise Stoltzfus.) I would have appreciated more diversity in the representation of women (both single and married).

Laura H. Weaver
Evansville, Ind.

Women's Concerns Report welcomes your letters. Please send correspondence to lstoltzfus@mccus.org or by regular post to the address on our masthead.

"Members of my congregation have learned that when they come to my home and find me barefoot it doesn't mean that I don't consider them worth dressing up for but that they are welcomed as family."

By Joan L. Hackman

Who are These People?

There is no hiding the truth: I am not an ethnic Mennonite. My unmarried name is English and my accent is pure North Georgia. My culture of origin is quite different from the rural Mennonite community of northern Indiana in which I now find myself. I have traveled a long and occasionally bewildering journey; God has made me a part of a people I didn't know existed.

To add to the challenge, my husband is also a non-ethnic Mennonite. We arrived here not by accident of birth but by joyful choice. Eighteen years ago we found a people with whom we shared a common theology and vision. The lack of a shared culture has provided significant growth opportunities for us and, I believe, for our new Mennonite brothers and sisters as well.

I am a spiritual director and a pastor's wife. My ministry is cross-cultural. As humans, our lives must be embodied in a culture. When we are with those who share the tradition of our birth, we act and interact without much thought. We communicate effortlessly, knowing others will understand our verbal and nonverbal messages. When we are with those of another tradition, however, we must constantly translate the messages we send and receive. For example, I have learned that when members of my congregation shake hands with me on Sunday morning, they are not insulting me. What my native culture communicates through hugs, my new culture communicates through handshakes. And the members of my congregation have learned that when they come to my home and find me barefoot it doesn't mean that I don't consider them worth dressing up for but that they are welcomed as family.

This process of translation will go on for the rest of my life, for "long years in the Mennonite church does not an ethnic Mennonite make." I will always miscommunicate and fail to grasp subtleties. My own translation process has taken on a structure, a series of questions which have helped me live and minister at this cultural interface. The questions fall into two categories: Who are these people? and Who am I?

Who are these people . . .

. . . in relation to each other?

When I first encountered Mennonites, I approached the problem in a fashion typical for me: I read everything by and about them that I could lay my hands on. In order to understand ethnic Mennonites I first had to know their origins and shared history. In that information lies a culture's values, dreams, wounds, achievements, heroes, self-understanding and expressions of the sacred. Knowledge of a people in the present is also necessary: demographics and sociology, current issues before the church, institutional structures and polity. All of these things can aid understanding of the cultural personality.

. . . in relation to other groups?

A study of history also reveals how a culture feels about those who are different from themselves. Cultures can be open or closed, separatist or ecumenical, welcoming or exclusive. Do they tend toward schism or merger? How do they respond to diversity? Is the stranger a guest or a threat? Are there boundaries which the stranger cannot cross? These questions are especially important to a ministering person who is an outsider.

. . . in relation to God?

The first two questions lay groundwork for this one, which has been the most crucial question in my ministry as a spiritual director. The first step was to read Mennonite theology; the next was to experience Mennonite worship. As I did so, I asked myself the following questions:

- What is their primary image of God? To most Mennonites, it is the suffering servant. Other groups may see God primarily as judge, triumphant king, father, lover, deliverer and many more. This question is crucial to spiritual direction, as it is a powerful determiner of one's experience of God.
- Where in the worship service do they meet God? I have learned that most Mennonites meet God in singing. Other groups meet God in the sermon, the sacraments, the manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the liturgy.
- What is their normative time? This may be a period of the church year or an era after the Resurrection. Mennonites honor the first generations of Anabaptists, but seem to find normative time in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. Other groups find normative time in

"It is necessary to equally honor both cultures—my own and the other's—not necessarily to agree, or approve, or understand, but always to honor."

Holy Week, the early church as recorded in the book of Acts, the period of their founding, or a time of future consummation.

Who am I ?

Cross-cultural work is an excellent place to discover our own assumptions. The most powerful of these are the deepest, and therefore the most difficult to recognize. As we begin to understand how another culture experiences the world, we are forced to acknowledge the existence of many differing world views. The one we have taken for granted becomes one option among many. And as we encounter other cultures, we are enabled to see ourselves through other eyes.

It is necessary to ask the same questions of our own tradition as we do of another's. We need to study our own history and theology, and to examine our image of God, our experience in worship, our normative time. In so doing, we are able to understand our own culture at a deeper level and to critique it in new ways, renewing both commitment and freedom in choosing.

The exchange of gifts

The key to cross-cultural interaction in spiritual direction is absolute respect. It is necessary to equally honor both cultures—my own and the other's—not necessarily to agree, or approve, or understand, but always to honor. Honoring requires acceptance of the strengths and weakness of both traditions, the good and bad in past and present. It means being able to see God at work in and through each tradition. It means supporting the individual's growth within his or her own cultural understandings.

As an outsider ministering among ethnic Mennonites, I have received great gifts. I have learned about peace and service, quiet faithfulness, willingness to suffer, humility, community and hospitality. I have been blessed by good music and good food. I have also been blessed by the awareness that the outside has much to give. My



"I have found many ethnic Mennonites to be puzzled as to why anyone would care to join them."

gifts to the ethnic Mennonite culture are translation, vision and affirmation.

- As a translator, I stand with feet in two worlds. I can help outsiders understand and enter the world of ethnic Mennonites, because I well know the barriers and sources of confusion. I can also help ethnic Mennonites understand and welcome outsiders.
- I have an outsider's vision of ethnic Mennonite culture. Presuppositions and ingrained patterns are more easily identified by the non-native. Options and new patterns may lie in the experiences of the outsider.
- I am an affirmer. To my great surprise, I have found many ethnic Mennonites to be puzzled as to why anyone would care to join them. Being free from any group inferiority complex, I can see and affirm the unique strengths of ethnic Mennonite culture. Things which are ordinary to many ethnic Mennonites are wonderful and infinitely precious to me.

Cross-cultural ministry is an opportunity to increase understanding and unity in the body of Christ. In the final analysis, cross-cultural experience is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which we all anticipate. All who are united in Christ are united through Christ to each other. In him we are joined with all believers everywhere, those alive today, those gone before and those not yet born. The diversity of God's church is beyond our comprehension. But what we cannot comprehend, we can affirm and celebrate. As we seek to understand in love, we build up the body of Christ and testify to the unity inherent among all its members.

Joan Hackman is a spiritual director and free-lance writer. She lives in Topeka, Ind., where her husband John is the pastor of Topeka Mennonite Church. She earned her B.S.N. from the University of Kentucky and worked 18 years in cardiac critical care. She graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary with a master of arts in theological studies with concentrations in Christian spirituality and church history. Joan and John have a 21-year-old foster daughter, Jen, and a dog named Caleb.

"Young girls told me of their secret love affairs when falling in love was expressly forbidden during college and could not be disclosed to anyone."

by Margaret Metzler

Counseling in China

After four years of teaching English in China with China Educational Exchange (CEE) and with the Amity Foundation, I was asked to serve as pastoral caregiver for the CEE teaching team. Prior to that time, no one person had been designated to be responsible for the psychological, spiritual, physical and mental needs of these people, both single and married, who serve with CEE as teachers in Chinese colleges and universities.

I accepted this position because I, too, had at one time been a first-timer in Asia. I understood how overwhelming the adjustment feels. My husband and I had experienced this from prior years in China, Hong Kong and Vietnam.

The nature of culture shock

Isolation and loneliness are common when people move from familiar to unfamiliar surroundings. But moving into a situation where one's life is more controlled by societal restraints creates additional stress. I expected that these teachers would experience the usual reactions to life in a controlled environment most places in China. There would be anger at the system that took control of even minor details of daily living. And that anger could flare at minor and insignificant inconveniences.

They would also feel guilt because these teachers had come from very privileged circumstances into situations where most of their daily contacts were with persons whose opportunities for attaining advancement or wealth were very limited.

I expected interpersonal difficulties among the teachers, between roommates, and perhaps even with the students. In a foreign setting interpersonal problems are exacerbated. Living away from one's familiar context is disorienting, demanding more attention and energy for the simple operations of everyday life than a newcomer may have.

Anger, resentment and depression set in very quickly when people do not naturally think alike or have little energy to try to understand another's thinking.

I also anticipated that loneliness and sexual attraction to someone on the local scene would not be uncommon. In this group of teachers would be men and women who would test out the possibilities of finding a partner. I remember a long stroll with a young man wondering what God had in mind for him. He wished to be married, but had not yet found "the right one," and the local women were lovely and eager to strike up a relationship.

In another instance, a woman nearing middle age was noticed by a man of her age from her own country. He was teaching in another institution nearby. "Am I just lonely?" she asked. "Or could this be God's plan for me?" She raised all the right questions: Should she encourage him? Would it matter that their religious beliefs differed greatly? Would her parents approve? These and similar questions had to be talked out before she felt comfortable enough to make a decision.

All of the usual props that one relied on in the home context were missing: small groups at church, regular worship in one's own language, supportive friends.

Helping volunteers experiencing cross-cultural stress

Sometimes I listened to the questions the volunteers asked and encouraged honest answers by asking questions that might lead to further clarification. Sometimes I recommended a book such as *The Dance of Anger* by Harriet Lerner (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), which often proved to be just what was needed.

Some people wanted a time of prayer so they could pour out their anguish and come to believe again that God loves and forgives. In the context of praying together, some discovered how to remedy damage they had caused to themselves and to others. Sometimes I walked with volunteers so they could more freely talk and emote.

Serious problems encountered by volunteers

"Mary" was a professional woman who had come to China hoping to work with others of her same profession, sharing her training and professional understandings with them. Instead, she was asked to teach English—not even English related to her profession. This felt like a come-down to her and a waste of what she had to offer. As time

passed, Mary became more and more depressed until she was not able to meet her classes. She sat in her room, doing busywork, isolating herself. She was not able to accept suggestions and help from colleagues working in the same city. One of the team called me and asked if I could make a trip there. He was concerned about Mary's well-being and emotional health. When he had gone to visit her, instead of answering the door, she had thrown dishes at it.

When I arrived, she was willing to go on long walks in a lovely park. I remember listening to her sad stories and watching the tears flow. She told me that she had become so enmeshed in her negative emotions that simple things would set her off, such as house repairs which the people responsible didn't get to.

Our walks and talks, grieving and praying, and exploration of possibilities for her future opened the way for her to be able to make a decision about her future.

Some teachers experienced the loss of a parent or other loved one while serving in China. In one instance, an older woman's brother died suddenly. She did not receive the news until two weeks later. It seemed to her that she should have been able to receive the news almost instantly. She felt grief at the loss of her brother, grief at missing the last chance of being together with relatives, and greatest grief that she had not been able to join with the whole family in the grieving process.

Stories of cultural differences

Sometimes it takes years of living in a culture and learning language to know *why* things are said or done the way they are. I realized that as a pastoral counselor who had had years of experience with Chinese people I could be



a bridge between the two sides, the two ways of thinking, the two ways of dealing with issues.

One middle-aged couple was called to their balcony to receive a message from the foreign affairs office. "Is your daughter's name 'Amy'?" the Chinese messenger called up to the balcony. "Yes," was the answer. "Well, we have a message that 'Amy' died," responded the messenger.

The couple was in utter shock, unable to think, act or feel. Then, as there were no further details, they remembered that a relative who had the same name had been seriously ill and had not been expected to live at the time they had left for China, so it was probably she who had died. Finally, they were able to phone home and discover the truth that their daughter had not died.

Another instance involved a medical emergency. A young couple had come through a medical crisis but were still suffering the emotional hurt it had caused them. The doctor and later other Chinese friends kept saying to them, "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter." The couple felt doubly hurt. "I wanted to shout, 'It *does* matter!'" the young woman confided. "Why did they try to tell me that it doesn't matter?"

When I told her that the phrase translated back into its Chinese is a very common and appropriate way to comfort and calm people in crisis, she could begin to relax and accept the fact that the Chinese, too, felt sad that she and her husband were hurting.

Problems of young people

English teachers are called on to do more than teach college-age Chinese students. There were always some stu-

"I began to count the days until I could go home—back to the States and away from the confusion and sin of my guilt-ridden missionary life."

dents in every class who looked for ways to get close to their foreign teacher, sometimes for ulterior motives, but often because they felt more free to confide in a foreigner than in a friend or teacher of their own culture. Mistrust and fear of being exposed seemed rampant. Many times I felt I was a counselor to these people, too.

Young girls told me of their secret love affairs when falling in love was expressly forbidden during college and could not be disclosed to anyone—not even one's best friend. They confided their pain because of the pressure to conform to their parents' expectations. Young married women who either could not get pregnant or did not yet wish to be came to me because their mothers-in-law mistreated them, belittling them because they had not yet produced a child.

One young man told me about his wife's abortion. I will never forget his abject sadness. A young American woman who was not part of the volunteer teacher group had married a Chinese man and become pregnant. She and her husband had felt it was not the right time to have a child, so she had had an abortion. It had proved to be very painful physically and emotionally. She was told by family members that she should have kept the baby and given it to someone else in the family, because Chinese people believe that children of mixed race will be exceptionally bright and beautiful.

Impact on me

I developed strong emotional bonds with these people who needed pastoral care in their time of overseas service. My relationships felt meaningful and my ties to them remain strong—even with those who refused my efforts to be helpful. I believe that sometimes the depth of pain they were experiencing prevented an acceptance of anyone's help. I give thanks for the healing, observed and unobserved.

Margaret Metzler and her husband, Everett, live in Goshen, Ind., where they are members of Assembly Mennonite Church. After working in Vietnam, Hong Kong and China, Margaret served as librarian at Mennonite Board of Missions. Most recently she and her husband have returned to China for a short-term assignment.

A volunteer's dilemma

Editor's Note: We share the following true story with you to pose the question, "As a counselor, friend, supervisor or pastor, how would you counsel the woman who tells this story?" The names of people, places and other identifying details are fictitious.

Introduction

I lived this story for two years. I had fleeting moments of clarity, but they quickly darkened to loneliness, isolation and sadness. Today, as I look at this young American woman from a distance, I see how naive and alone she felt. I feel her confusion and wish there had been someone she had trusted and with whom she could have opened up with honesty and forthrightness.

Chapter 1

As a volunteer church worker in the mid 1980s, I did not stay in the capital city to do language study, for I already knew Portuguese. Instead, after several nights in the capital with the other volunteers, I went straight to the village of my assignment where I stayed with Sandy and James Smith, the workers I was replacing. Soon after my arrival many villagers, including Simon who was a friend of the Smiths, stopped by to greet me.

Simon worked with our organization's dam building project. He was a nice guy who had helped Sandy, as a single volunteer, learn the language and get acclimated to the village. They became friends and remained friends even after Sandy's visit to North America to marry James and subsequent return to finish her village assignment. Simon was a friend, helper and co-worker of both Sandy and James.

About a month after my arrival, the Smiths' term ended. Simon, who had hung out with the Smiths, started hanging out at my place even though it wasn't dam building season. I imagined he missed James and Sandy and wanted a cool place to sit for a while. I didn't mind, for he explained cultural innuendoes and let me practice the local language.

During the next year, Simon stopped by often even though he was not working with me, but with George, the volun-

Women in Ministry

Julie Bender, co-pastor at Hamilton (Ont.) Mennonite Church, was ordained for pastoral ministry on January 9, 2000.

June Mears Driedger recently began a pastorate at MSU Mennonite Fellowship, East Lansing, Michigan.

On October 3, 1999, **Ruth Shank Martin** was licensed for ministry by Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada. She will serve as Coordinator of Pastoral Care for Tri-County Mennonite Homes, New Hamburg, Ontario. The license was given at Hillcrest Mennonite Church.

teer in charge of dam building. Simon often stayed just long enough to greet me and see how things were going. Once in a while he would volunteer to run errands for me in the market.

It took me a while to notice that his visits were getting longer and more frequent. When I did notice, I thought he had become more comfortable being around me, felt amused by my language learning and wanted to practice English. The work season had begun, and I was teaching health lessons in several villages in which he did dam work, so we would talk about coordinating village visits and meetings.

Chapter 2

During this first year, I became close friends with a Peace Corps volunteer who was in the same region as I. Greg was my age and an active Christian. We struck up a friendship and got together often to cook American food like fried chicken and Jell-O.

When Peace Corps volunteers had to leave the country for political reasons, Simon knew I missed Greg immensely. Simon began stopping by more often to make sure I wasn't getting too sad. I truly thought he was stopping out of genuine concern for me. Now I know that if he felt any concern, it was slathered with a rich helping of lust.

Chapter 3

I said "No!" to Simon countless times, using countless tones of voice: angry, serious, professional, pleading—to name a few. And I used three languages. His response, no matter what language or tone would always be, "In my language we have a proverb that says, 'If you keep asking, sooner or later you will get what you want.'" I told him that the proverb was wrong and that I would prove it.

Chapter 4

I never said "Yes." In fact as he reached for my clothes and my body the first time, I continued to say, "No! No! Simon. This is wrong. You are married. You and I are not married to each other."

He just kept saying, "I want you, and I know you want me too."

As I lay there that first time with him on top of me, confusion ran through my body and my soul. I cried. The long and short of it is that at age 24, thousands of miles from home, I lost my virginity. I cried.

Physically, in some ways it felt good. Emotionally, it felt wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew it was a violation of my commitment to myself. I knew it was a violation of my professional relationship with the village. I knew it was a violation of Simon's marriage vows. I was overcome with guilt and grief. I told Simon it could *never* happen again. He agreed.

A week or so later, he was after me again—visiting me after dark, talking to me about sexual things, trying to touch me, and attempting to coerce me into bed. I dreaded his coming by every evening. When he did I told him "No!" what seemed like a thousand times. As before, I pushed him away. I told him it was sin. I told him it was not fair to his wife. This is where our conversations ended. Eventually he got me into bed. And, like the first time, I was overcome with guilt and grief. I felt depressed and confused. I worried about getting pregnant.

Chapter 5

The sick cycle of Simon coming on to me and of my saying "No!" continued for several months. Then I realized that if I had not yet succeeded in ending his sexual advances, he would probably continue. Finally, I began to use contraceptives to ease my mind about conceiving in the midst of this chaos.

Chapter 6

Perhaps one could say that I wanted the friendship enough to allow Simon's wants to be met. I will not deny that having a close friend—one who came by daily to see how I was doing, someone who would stay to talk in the evenings, someone who taught me about the language and the culture, someone who cared when I was out of town—was nice.

But the sexual part of our relationship never seemed ethically or morally right. I asked Simon to pray with me about it and to read the Bible—all of which he was willing to do. But when his hormones were aroused, no amount of prayer or Bible reading or rational conversation stopped him.

continued on page 18

"I was too afraid of her further response to talk to her, yet I wanted to tell her I was not doing it on 'purpose,' I had not planned this, I was not proud of it, I felt trapped."

Many times I told him that it was possible for women and men to be friends and colleagues without sleeping together. He replied that it was impossible. In his culture, he said, that was not true. If you worked with someone long enough, eventually, if you were sexually attracted to each other, you slept together. That's just the way it is.

When I *really* pushed, wanting the relationship to end, he adamantly declared, "Then I cannot work with you or your organization. It wouldn't work." Whether or not that was true, I knew Simon well enough to know that he was quite serious.

In case it was true and out of loyalty to my employer and fear of jeopardizing its work there, I resigned myself to this relationship. I found some relief in knowing that when I left the village, geography would stop the intercourse for good. I began to count the days until I could go home—back to the States and away from the confusion and sin of my guilt-ridden missionary life.

Chapter 7

Although this relationship with Simon cast a shadow over all I did, it was not the sum total of my experience and ministry there. Many good things happened during those three years. I formed healthy friendships with local women, I learned to know several single women from Europe, who spoke English and Portuguese, who worked at a Protestant mission station. I spent some time with them. However, they worked long hours at the dispensary and had full evenings, so they really did not have much time to develop friendships.

An American couple in the same village knew something was going on between Simon and me. The woman made it very clear to me that she did not approve. I was too afraid of her further response to talk to her, yet I wanted to tell her I was not doing it on "purpose," I had not planned this, I was not proud of it, I felt trapped. But I just accepted her comments, saying nothing back.

Chapter 8

The life situations of the other missionaries and volunteers do not excuse my behavior—or the behavior I let happen to me. As I look back, I sense how I slowly let myself

become isolated to the point of turning to the one person who did reach out to me, Simon.

Being far away from my family and natural support system does not excuse my behavior—or the behavior I let happen to me. Yet, I realize how being immersed in a totally different culture and language contributed to my adaptation to cultural differences—even when to adapt was hurtful to me.

Therefore, I write this story years after it happened, hoping that it will help others. Working overseas and in cross-cultural situations may isolate volunteers and put them at risk of conforming in ways they do not desire. I tell my story so that they may be sensitive to themselves and others who are at risk of becoming trapped in unhealthy behaviors and habits by isolation and cultural differences.

I did not go overseas looking for a mate or spouse. I especially did not go looking for casual sex. I went to share the skills I have to help to empower people, and I went to learn from another culture. I did both—but not in the ways I had anticipated.

Chapter 9

I close now with suggestions a counselor might have underscored for me. A counselor could have helped me to stay with my resolve to follow these suggestions. If you are a friend, therapist, counselor, support person, or volunteer's minister, remind your friends to pursue spiritual, emotional, social and physical health—for their own good and the good of their service.

1. Form healthy friendships among both expatriates and nationals, keeping professional boundaries healthy;
2. Be honest with someone about your fears, problems, concerns and joys;
3. Use your vacation, retreat, and extra time if you need it, especially if you find yourself on the verge of tears, emotionally drained, excessively tired, not wanting to get out of bed and/or unable to do your assignment's work.

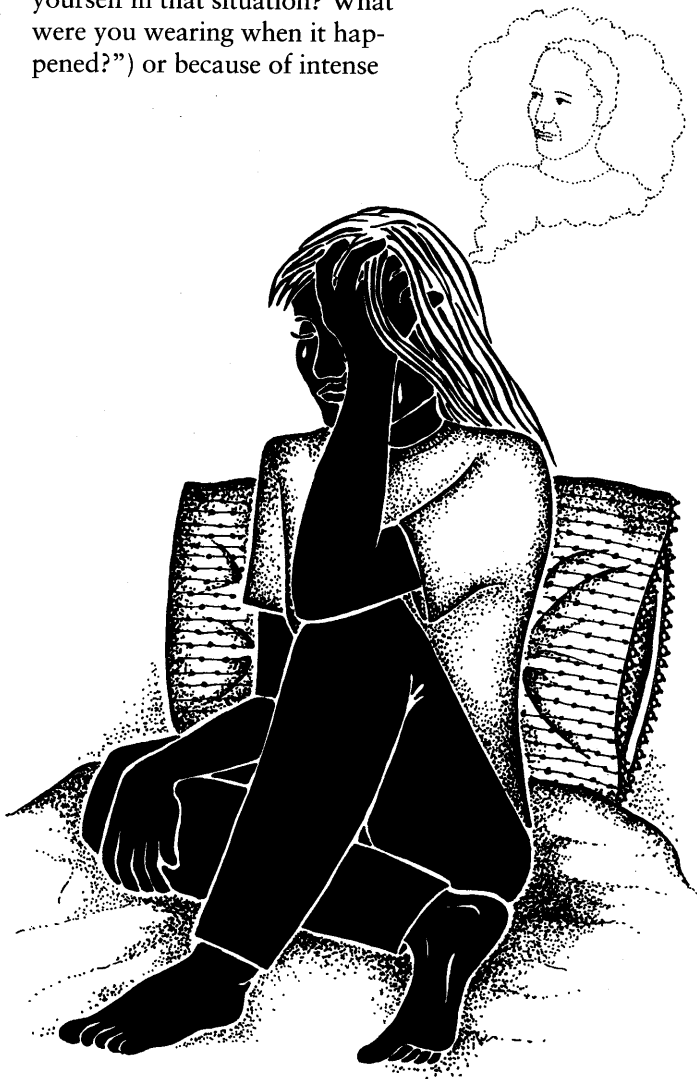
Remember, when you are healthy your ministry can be healthy. When you need help to stay healthy—and we all do—we can give ourselves permission to ask for it.

"The one caution I would lift up after reading this account is to not blithely attribute the wrong done to this young woman as a by-product of cultural difference."

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

Response to volunteer's dilemma

The previous writer's story is an important one for the church and its agencies to hear. It is important because sexual abuse happens, and it happens to a lot of people, not all of whom feel safe to share their stories. They don't feel safe because they fear they won't be believed ("You must have misunderstood") or because they will be blamed ("How could you put yourself in that situation? What were you wearing when it happened?") or because of intense



shame. And so, for far too many women, the truth remains untold, healing does not occur and perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions.

The accounting you just read of one young woman's sexual victimization in the course of her service to the church is not unique. Even if it were unique, one time is once too many. How could this situation have been different? As the writer indicates, one option is to consciously create support systems for volunteers; these systems can help nurture healthy relationships with appropriate boundaries.

The one caution I would lift up after reading this account is to not blithely attribute the wrong done to this young woman as a by-product of cultural difference. To do so would condone the violation of whole societies of women. It would also serve to perpetuate stereotypical racial myths concerning the sexuality of certain groups of men. The perpetrator involved in this situation clearly sexually violated the author of the story. His cultural/ethnic background makes no difference—even though he used that reason as a method of control over the woman. In the forward to *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Heggen), Marie Fortune writes: "Sexual violence and abuse take place in a patriarchal context, in settings in which men dominate and women submit . . . (It) is one of the most concrete means of exercising power and control over someone else . . ." (p.10). In other words, it can (and does) occur in most places around the world.

Our churches and church agencies must become places where people can speak truth about all kinds of oppression and victimization. Sexual abuse is but one of them, but perhaps the place we have been most silent. We can remain silent no longer.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus is Associate Pastor at Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio. She is married to Art Stoltzfus and the co-parent of four children. She served on the MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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News and verbs

- In August 1999, Kathryn Mitchell Loewen began a half-time position with MCC Canada as **Women's Network coordinator**. She previously served with MCC in Newfoundland from 1987-90 and has also been a member of MCC Manitoba Women's Concerns Committee. She and her husband Russell have four children. They attend Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

- The MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns is looking for a replacement for Regina Shands Stoltzfus, Cleveland, Ohio, who served as a representative from the Mennonite Church. The three-year volunteer position is open to a Mennonite woman from the central United States. Women of color are encouraged to apply. For more information or to express interest, contact Beth Graybill, MCC US, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500. Email bgraybill@mccus.org or call (717) 859-3889.

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